How do language, culture, and identity contribute to a student’s ability to learn? And what is our responsibility as educators to multilingual students in our English dominant schooling system?

composing a new community infused with bilingual, biliterate, and bicultural realities

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In 2012 several colleagues from across colleges came together with a few university deans to create the Center for Bilingual Studies at the University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA). We volunteered to do the work of building the Center because we believe in the purpose and goals of nurturing an institution that promotes bilingualism through a series of partnerships with public schools, organizations, and communities in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. More importantly, this work is personal to us. We believe in the virtue of bilingualism, appreciate the richness it has given our lives, and intend to give shape to our emerging institution as a bilingual university. Our commitment is born in each of our personal stories. We come from different places—Mexico, Texas, and Colorado—but we share a collective vision engendered in each of our life stories as we grew up in our own familial and community environments.

What follows is a manifestation of our personal stories, as much as it is our collective vision as advocates for bilingualism. In this article we lay out a series of arguments that point to greater social cognitive, cultural, and academic possibilities that result from bilingualism for children and residents of the Rio Grande Valley. We believe this is a historic moment primed to usher in a new discourse that departs from a time that marginalized the importance of the Spanish language in favor of English. We believe it is time to value Spanish, as much as we value English, because they both define the bilingual, bicultural, and binational realities of this part of the world.

Broadening Social Perspectives

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I come from a bicultural heritage. My mother grew up in the heartland of America, a “white” farm girl with limited exposure to worldly extravagances. She was reared in a small town, a monolingual English-speaking community. My father was born in a camp for Mexican American coal miners into a family rich in pride for their cultural traditions, but poor in most other ways. Spanish
was his first language. He has recalled the challenges of learning English at school-age and the peer rejection from non-Mexican classmates. Despite my parents’ economic challenges, or possibly because of them, both were very motivated to go to college to build a secured future. They worked their way through school, and this instilled a deep sense of pride about it for them. Their beliefs about the importance of education were imparted to me early on and I quickly became a dedicated and driven student. Yet, as a student in suburban Denver, Colorado, my education took place entirely in monolingual English-speaking classrooms, with little to no emphasis on culturally unique pedagogical practices.

When I visited mis abuelos, my father’s mother energetically played the accordion and guitar, singing lively traditional Spanish songs. The rhythms and excitement of the music awakened me, but the words were lost on me. I was endearingly called mi hijita while taught to prepare tortillas using my hands as measuring cups, but I was too young to consider why measuring cups might have been hard to come by for some or to recognize the importance of learning my cultural and family customs. My grandmother envisioned that one day these traditions and her language would be realized in her grandchildren. Unfortunately, she passed away before this was fully achieved; and even though I sensed a longing to connect with this part of my heritage, my minimal extracurricular Spanish lessons were too basic, too infrequent, and too inconsequential for the language to take hold in me. My father was fluent in Spanish (and graduate school-educated in English), but he emphasized learning math, reading, and writing much more so than acquiring a second language. These were the subjects that comprised our report cards. It wasn’t until years later when I took Spanish as a foreign language requirement that I truly knew what I had missed because I hadn’t learned Spanish well as a child. There, I immediately recognized that my bilingual classmates were advantaged. I began to wonder how being able to navigate two social worlds and converse with others with diverse perspectives shaped one’s social values and affected perceptions.

I came to the Rio Grande Valley in 2006 and began research on bilingual children. My work is premised on existing evidence of social cognitive advantages among bilingual children. I study the development of theory of mind, which refers to a kind of folk psychology: an understanding that people’s mental states (desires, thoughts, beliefs) can be used to predict their behavior. Given that bilinguals have the ability to interact with a diverse range of others, perhaps they have more unique types of exposure to the connection between mental states and actions, which provides them increased insight about how thoughts and behavior relate. While many questions remain regarding bilingual children’s development, some research has pointed in the direction of cognitive advantages. Bilinguals are constantly inhibiting one language while using the other. This has been shown to afford bilinguals improved abilities on some social cognitive tasks (Goetz, 2003; Kovacs, 2009). For example, Rubio-Fernandez, and Glucksberg (2012) have suggested that bilingual adults show an early
sociolinguistic sensitivity and have enhanced executive control that likely contributes to their improved reasoning abilities. Importantly, though, there are many variables to consider when studying bilinguals, including the individual’s language dominance (i.e., some individuals have a balanced proficiency in both languages, while others are better in one or the other) and other sociocultural contextual factors. Not all bilingual children are alike. The Rio Grande Valley offers great promise for studying a diverse range of bilingual children. Through the establishment of the Center for Bilingual Studies, we hope to support and extend research in this area. We also hope to inform educational policies and practices across a range of educational contexts and inform the community about the benefits of developing bilingual, biliterate, and bicultural learners.

Preserving Familial and Cultural Identity

I was born in Mexico to a father who went to the fourth grade in rural Mexico and a mother who also grew up in rural Mexico. There was no school close to her village, so she received no formal schooling. They raised four boys who they brought to the US as young children and would offer them the opportunities of a public education in their new country. All four graduated from college, three even earned PhDs, while the fourth opted out of a doctoral program because he preferred to work in the corporate world—in short, to make some money.

My parents put us through a most effective college preparation program defined by goals, timelines, and outcomes. The goals consisted of loving us every day, feeding and clothing us as best as they could, and ensuring we knew who we were as cultural beings and as members of the family. The timelines were informed by targeting high school graduation as an important achievement, and then supporting us morally and in any other way they could after high school. Papi and Mami had no clue what a university was about or how to prepare for it academically. They simply knew that if they exercised unmitigated emotional and parental support, somehow their boys would figure it out. And we did.

The outcomes my parents laid out for us included that they wanted doctors. That’s what my father said to a friend of his when my oldest brother Pepe was a baby. “Mi hijo Pepe va hacer doctor,” is what he told his compadre. It was a story my father would tell and retell as he and my mother raised us with a healthy dose of stories. This was a key story because Pepe eventually earned his doctorate, as did two of his younger brothers, Miguel and me, because it was the dream of my father and my mother. The story of the “doctor,” and all other stories with which my parents raised us, were told in Spanish, my parents’ native tongue, and the only language they knew. It was the language that shaped us as cultural beings, and it was the language that gave us a sense of identity as both Mexicanos and Americans.
For my brothers and me, Spanish was the language that defined our personal and familial identity. When I went to kindergarten, Mrs. Martinez "baptized" me as "Frankie," and every teacher thereafter called me Frankie or Frank until the day I graduated from Edcouch-Elsa High School in Elsa, Texas. In my kinder report card, Mrs. Martinez wrote, "Frankie did not know English at all, but is doing fairly well." I did well as a kid and was prepared for school through a set of informal activities at home where there was ample conversation, plática, and storytelling. It was all done in Spanish, as far as any of us recall. When I landed at Edcouch Elementary School in the fall of 1970, the impact of the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 was about to make its way into my school. Fortunately for me, the original emphasis of this new school reform encouraged schools to use children’s native tongue to help them understand academic content, but also to help them find their way in school as cultural beings. While Mrs. Martinez Anglicized my name, she also validated my existence as a Mexican boy who spoke pretty good Spanish. Years later, she would share with me that she didn’t know what she was doing with the new bilingual education mandates, but that she at least felt relieved that she could communicate with her children in Spanish. “That was so important,” she said.

After kinder, I lived a life of multiple identities, as many of my classmates and contemporaries did. Language was important to us as kids because through Spanish we respected our parents and maintained meaningful lives with them, just as we used English to negotiate school work and other functions at the school house, which included the important work of playing sports and doing other extracurricular activities. Much of our social life was executed through a fascinating combination of un poquito de inglés, un poquito de español, y mucho combination vernacular. We could hold a conversation with relatives, all in Spanish, and we tried to hold all English conversations with teachers and other adults at school; the all English was more challenging at that time. We frequently pushed the envelope on language ingenuity, as my friends and I created new words to mean things people from other places simply wouldn’t understand. I recall that as an undergraduate student at the University of Texas at Austin, as I quarterbacked an intramural flag football team of almost all Edcouch-Elsa alumni, I called the plays at the line of scrimmage in a pidgin language that most “white” opponents simply could not understand. A defensive player once remarked, “Hey, I’m taking first year Spanish. What they’re saying sounds nothing like what I’m studying!”

Spanish was our language for self-identity. English was our language of self-identity. Both were equally important. We realized that, even built our own high school and undergraduate communities through that understanding, but the institutions didn’t seem to quite get that. Our language and cultural power were primarily wielded in our informal activities; the formal institutions lagged behind our innovation and ingenuity. Our language was fluid, helped us get through college, and even positioned us to be gainfully employed. The places of employment, in our case the schools, did not fully appreciate the value of our language and cultural realities.
When I became a high school language arts and social studies teacher, I encouraged my students to explore their language, their stories, and their identities. Early in my career I did this through English and Social Studies classes as we studied important literary work and important events in the chronicle of this country. But I also quickly found a relative disconnect between the lived experiences of my students and the language, geographies, and values that informed the literary canon of the Western World and celebrated historical events and characters. I often saw students frustrated, even disengaged, when discussing Chaucer, Shakespeare, or Faulkner, but they seemed more closely engaged when talking about their family stories. So I created lessons where they explored their stories, their own languages. Writing then became an easier exercise. When they wrote about their own stories, they tended to find their voices, and in due time, their stories became the new texts. Their narratives became important documents that explored family stories and that helped students find their personal and cultural identities. Once I had them hooked, we then moved on to Shakespeare.

Coming together with colleagues from UTPA who cared to examine what happens when language, identity, culture, and academic development converge was exciting. While our personal narratives might appear divergent, they each explore language as a critical variable in our academic, cultural, or even political development. We come to this place with the singleminded vision of helping children, families, and communities find ways to respect and value their native tongue as they find effective ways to build the skills to lead productive lives in this society. Finding such colleagues made it easier to commit to this work through formalizing the Center for Bilingual Studies.

Navigating Academic Worlds

I was born in Weslaco, Texas, to young parents born and raised in the Rio Grande Valley. My mother was nineteen years old when she had me and had no intention of going to college. My father was twenty-one and had joined the US Navy where he was stationed in San Diego, California, and had the opportunity to travel the world. Before I was born, both my parents worked the fields picking cotton, onions, cucumbers, and other local crops. My father grew up as a migrant worker; he and his family traveled north to work the fields in Michigan, Wisconsin, and California. They both attended and graduated from Edcouch-Elsa High School, as did my brother, two younger sisters, and I. My mother’s parents were Texas born and raised. My grandfather Andrés was a proud World War II veteran who never missed an opportunity to share his war stories. My grandmother Alicia was mainly a stay-home mom who worked briefly in a retirement home in the Delta Lake area, a place just north of Elsa. Both my grandparents spoke to their children and grandchildren mostly in English, with just a sprinkle of Spanish. My paternal grandmother Guadalupe was also Texas born and raised, widowed in her early thirties, and raised nine
children by herself. She was a talented cook, known for her tacos de frijoles. She was the only close relative who spoke Spanish in my family, although she could understand English quite well. None of my grandparents reached middle school, but they were bien educados and great leaders in their family.

My parents grew up in the midst of the 1960s and count the Civil Rights Movement as influential in their lives. Equally influential was the discrimination they experienced in school. They faced numerous academic barriers, were punished for speaking Spanish, and were often ridiculed for being Mexican American. My father occasionally spoke of the Edcouch-Elsa High School walkout of 1968. E-E High School students organized a student walkout to protest discrimination and the prohibition of the use of Spanish on school grounds. He recalls watching the protesting students through a classroom window; he regretfully did not participate in the walkout. He said that although he supported the reasons for the walkout, he didn't want to give the school administration any reason to keep him from graduating from high school. He was determined to be the first in his family to graduate, which he did successfully.

My father continued his schooling, though with deliberate speed, mostly because he was raising a family. Twenty-four years after high school graduation, he became the first, and only, in his family to complete a university degree. His graduation was one semester before my own university graduation. I asked him to delay his graduation one semester so that we could graduate together, but he replied, “Mija, I need to finish before any of my children... that’s important to me.” Education was at the heart of our family. My parents raised us with the expectation of attaining our college degrees. They supported this expectation by participating in school events, helping us with our schoolwork, and speaking to us mainly in English, which they believed would ensure our path to academic success. This was based on their personal and often painful experience with language. Unfortunately, we didn't grow up with a strong mastery of the Spanish language—academic or otherwise.

I entered elementary school as an English dominant student, so I did not receive any academic instruction in Spanish. I would hear Spanish on the playground and on the school bus, but I spoke only English with my teachers and most of my friends. My family attended a community church where I learned how to read and communicate in Spanish. With the influence of the community, I developed basic Spanish skills that allowed me to navigate in my bilingual/bicultural community.

Although I grew up in a bilingual/bicultural community, I had not given the impact of language and culture on my life much consideration. When my mother became a bilingual education teacher, she began to understand the importance of acknowledging and appreciating students’ home language and culture, something that had been denied to her parents and herself. That emerging consciousness poured into our home. As I watched her prepare for her lessons, I became curious about language and culturally relevant literature. I started to read more Spanish material and communicated with my
grandparents in Spanish, even if my grandfather continued to speak to me mostly in English. I was trying to practice the language we had been denied.

When I attended the University of Michigan at the age of eighteen, I realized I was part of a minority group. It was a strange feeling because, growing up in a largely Mexican American community, I hadn’t felt the discrimination or struggles, in part because my parents had shielded us from those experiences. My parents spoke to us in the dominant language (aside from the casual code-switching), gave me an “American” name, and the school system grouped me with students of the same academic and linguistic ability, which meant I only had class with the same students throughout middle and high school. Most of my extracurricular activities were also with the same group of students (cheerleading, student council, etc.). My interactions with other students outside that group were limited to lunch and recess. Although this sheltering had good intentions, I now feel that I missed out on an authentic cultural upbringing.

I began my career as a bilingual education teacher in a rural community right on the US-Mexican border. The initial six weeks of instruction awakened me to the significant mismatch between home and school culture for many students who didn’t have a similar, sheltered upbringing as I and other teachers had experienced. The false assumption that all students from the Rio Grande Valley share identical experiences and background guided me to deliver instruction using methods of deficit thinking and remedial teaching. The school approached teaching with a need to help children “catch up.” Banks (2006) advises teachers they must be cautious on how they classify students’ cultural experiences. Not all cultural, familial experiences are the same within a cultural “brand.” As I began to understand my students’ backgrounds and home cultures by visiting their homes, driving around the colonias and city parks, and shopping at the local supermarket, I realized students had a wealth of knowledge and skills I needed to utilize in the classroom to facilitate the connection between the academic content and their community. Later, I learned this wealth in students had been studied and described as their “funds of knowledge” (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

Although most teachers on that campus cared deeply about student success, the structure of the school’s Early-Exit Transitional Bilingual Education Program supported the development of limited bilinguals. Limited bilinguals are students with a low level of academic proficiency in both languages who subsequently struggle to perform well academically (Cummins, 1984). The low level of language proficiency is a result of a student’s inability to develop his/her native language to a particular academic level before transitioning to an all English classroom setting, not a reflection of a student’s potential to learn academic content. As a third grade teacher, most of my students struggled to learn academic content in English, largely because of their underdeveloped English literacy levels, but they had also not developed the literacy skills in Spanish to learn the material in Spanish. They were caught between two linguistic worlds without the proper skills to navigate through either.
I remember hearing teachers advise parents against speaking to their children in Spanish, watching Spanish movies, and listening to Spanish music on the radio in order to “help” their children achieve English proficiency. Wanting to do what was best for their children, parents would agree to try their best to conform to those expectations. As a novice to the field of bilingual education, I felt I needed to become better informed on how to effectively address the needs of my students. What I witnessed happening in the school did not match what I had learned at the university, nor did it feel fair to the students and their families. Therefore, I pursued a master’s degree and a doctorate in bilingual/bicultural education.

Now, as a parent of two young boys, I have made great efforts to ensure their bilingualism, biliteracy, and biculturalism. This journey has not been easy. Some of my aunts and cousins question why I speak to them in Spanish saying, “They’re going to be behind in school because you speak to them in Spanish.” I try to explain the benefits of balanced bilinguals, children that can function academically, at grade-level, in two languages equally (Cummins, 1984). However, their personal experiences in school overpower my explanations. They remember being punished for speaking Spanish; they remember being ridiculed in school. They didn’t want the same fate for my children. My work at the university and with public schools focuses on providing a rigorous, inclusive, and supportive bilingual education for all students, especially Spanish-speaking students. Although initially Spanish was not part of my self-identity, I have evolved into a bilingual/bicultural person that advocates the same opportunity for bilingual children and parents.

There have been a number of scholarly articles and research studies demonstrating the academic benefits of bilingualism and biliteracy. One highly cited study is that of Thomas and Collier (2002). This study validated the academic outcomes of additive bilingual programs (Two-Way Dual Language and One-Way Dual Language) compared to subtractive bilingual programs (Early and Late-Exit Transitional, Content-Based ESL, ESL Pull-Out). The student groups in the additive programs not only closed the well-documented achievement gap of minority language students, but they outperformed native-English students in English assessments. Despite this and other research studies, only three of the twenty-nine school districts in the Rio Grande Valley implement an additive, dual language program at the elementary level (one district implements dual language PK-12 grade) to date. Over ninety-five percent of the other school districts use an early-exit transitional bilingual program (PEIMS Report, 2012). It is evident that there is a great need for deep, meaningful conversations between researchers, educators, families, and community members involving effective educational practices for students in the Rio Grande Valley. The Center for Bilingual Studies has organized such conversations with educational stakeholders since its inception, and more are being planned.
**Bridging across Educational Levels**

The Center for Bilingual Studies has held several successful sessions that engaged an audience in an organic conversation surrounding issues in bilingual education. For example, the Center hosted a Community Learning Exchange in February 2013 that brought together members from local school districts to have conversations about their respective bilingual education programs. Community Learning Exchanges are networks of people, organizations, and communities who come together to share their wisdom and collective leadership approaches to better address critical social issues. They are an effective method of developing trust among participants, engaging learners around shared interests, and problem solving collectively.

Our Learning Exchange on bilingual education brought together the voices of business owners, non-profit service providers, educators at all levels, parents, and administrators. Importantly, the process is designed as a learning opportunity for all, not one in which there is a clear teacher restricting discourse. The Exchange we held was a transformative occasion for participants, with some indicating that this was the most meaningful professional development opportunity they had attended. We plan to continue these exchanges to increase conversations on these important issues.

**Bridging across History**

We are the composite of our life stories, and as expressive beings, we are similarly the sum of our language experiences. An important value of the Center for Bilingual Studies is to learn from the wisdom and stories of elders, and through the early work of the Center we have engaged community elders through an oral history project. The goal is to learn the history of language experiences in the region through the stories of elders. During the first year of the oral history work, we called on educators who pioneered bilingual education programs in South Texas public schools to share stories about their early childhood experiences in schools and about their work as bilingual education teachers, administrators, and advocates. Typically they shared their oral histories as they sat with students and faculty interviewers in the Center’s interview studio. Students and faculty members asked questions, and the elders told stories about language use, about bilingual education, and about the history of communities and schools of the region.

The stories have been riveting, and often poignant. Most of the elders have told stories confirming what education historians describe as a history of language oppression (Blanton, 2004; San Miguel, 2004). One elder said, "I was confused why we were spanked for speaking our native tongue in schools. For many of us it was the only language we knew" (Guajardo, 2013). Children punished for speaking Spanish in school is a common story in the chronicle of the Rio Grande Valley, and the practice has had a lasting impact on the region. Elders have pointed out that parents often raise their children to learn only
English because they don’t want their children to suffer language oppression as they did. The elders tell these stories with great regret, but they also tell stories of their desire for justice, fairness, and for just a little humanity, particularly regarding how schools dealt with them as Mexican American children who spoke Spanish. Though the stories were often haunting, they also described the powerful agency they had as adults who were driven to make things right. That’s what we want. We want to make things right for our children, their families, and communities. We want to nurture and participate in an environment that values a child’s native language, whatever that language may be, and we want to do that by starting with our own stories. We need to be introspective before we delve into the stories of others. We invite you to do the same, and to view our Oral History Series.

The low level of language proficiency is a result of a student’s ability to develop his/her native language to a particular academic level before transitioning to an all English classroom setting, not a reflection of a student’s potential to learn academic content.
REFERENCES


Increased discussion about bilingual and biliterate instruction are needed among educators at all levels. Ideally, bilingual learners can be supported from birth into adulthood, but this will require much more communication among educators than is happening now. To take a deep look into an idealistic future, though, requires first reflecting on our past.

In the past, bilingual learners were ridiculed for their lack of English-speaking abilities. Oral histories from elders reveal that hurtful verbal and physical abuse by peers and school personnel endured during childhood has had lasting effects. These storytellers describe a time only a generation ago when principals would spank children for speaking Spanish in the hallways or playground at school, teachers watered down content for any of the Spanish speaking children, despite their propensity for achievement, and Pan American University required students with strong Spanish accents to take English language assessments prior to admission. In one compelling tale, a student recalled being asked to change his name so that it might "sound more American" and be more easily pronounced, save nothing of his identity.

Presently, it is clear that we have progressed since those times, but the memories still sting in the hearts and minds of grandparents and parents who face the challenges of embracing a new way of educating that includes celebrating heritage language and traditions. Not surprisingly, some cannot accept this new approach and therefore resist practices of teaching content in both languages, despite mounting evidence of its effectiveness. We must consider this when engaging in discourse about the future of bilingualism in our community. Many current decision-makers about bilingual education in South Texas’ Rio Grande Valley have deeply held beliefs. Our discussions need to be gentle but provocative two-way conversations during which we each listen and learn from one another. By convening a community of educators, our Center for Bilingual Studies has made progress. Several school districts have taken steps toward implementing curriculum and instructional approaches that have proven effectiveness for bilingual learners and more are eager.

In the future, we envision a community like what we have seen in Ottawa (a bilingual English/French Canadian city), but that celebrates our own cultural heritage, language, and families. We look to a day when monolingual freshmen can enter the new UTRGV (opening its doors in fall 2015) and matriculate as fully bilingual, biliterate individuals, empowered with the cognitive, academic, and comprehensive skills necessary to compete globally. We have been inspired by Ottawa, where schools offer eighty percent of courses in both languages, allow students to submit assignments and exams in either language, and celebrate the bicultural heritage of the region. Yet we realize that to feed the university we envision, we must refine the surrounding
community of learners. Several strategies have proven effective in higher education from which we can draw.

In our own classrooms, we have seen the usefulness of providing culturally-affirming curriculum, encouraging students to speak Spanish during cooperative learning peer group activities and/or formal presentations, and requiring service learning activities that embed students within our bilingual community so that they can not only apply learned content to practical application, but gain knowledge from community members and experiences that could never have been acquired in the classroom. For example, ten to twelve psychology students presented a formal research symposium about a study they conducted on bilingual children’s academic success. After this talk, many of the audience members began a discussion about their own experiences acquiring language(s) in the Valley. It led to the development of a classroom assignment for psychology students requiring students to write their own linguistic autobiography, reflecting on the challenges and advantages of teaching bilingual learners.

**Assignment(s)**

Reflect on and detail your experiences with language acquisition. Describe the types of (language) instruction you’ve had and the feelings you developed during interactions with teachers, school staff, and peers at school about the use of language. If you’re monolingual, reflect on what it might be like to acquire a second language. If you’re bilingual (or multilingual), how has your understanding of multiple languages shaped your perspective. Finally, try to connect your experiences with topics in child development from our class. What insights do you reach about how cultural context shapes language development?

While this assignment was specifically designed for a child development course for college-students in psychology, it could easily be modified to fit other classrooms and to meet a variety of levels of learners. Other potential assignments include keeping an on-going assessment or diary of languages experiences, interviewing elders in the community to gain an oral history of their experiences regarding language acquisition, and developing a research paradigm for investigating language acquisition in bilingual children.